

Isolation Squared? An Autoethnography Study of the Comprehensive Examination During the COVID-19 Outbreak

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to employ autoethnography as a methodology to examine my doctoral comprehensive exam experience in the context of COVID-19. It was a special period of “isolation squared” with both the take-home exam and the stay-at-home order enforced. Through diary entries, I recorded my complex feelings of overwhelming, anxiety, fears, and guiltiness during the exam process. Drawing on the lens of situated learning, I interpreted my self-reflective experience as an effort to move from a novice researcher to full participation. Situating my learning in a wider context, I obtained a deeper understanding of myself, my relationship with others, and the socio-cultural context.

Keywords: autoethnography, comprehensive examination, doctoral education, COVID-19

The comprehensive examination or the qualifying exam is a pivotal milestone in the doctoral study process. It is normally regarded as a process of isolating oneself from the outside world and taking exams independently. Recently, with the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, most universities around the globe switched to remote learning. Almost all students were experiencing isolation from the community to keep safe and protect others in the spring of 2020. As a third-year Ph.D. student in an adult education program at a US institution, I took the comprehensive exam during the coronavirus outbreak from March to April 2020. Faced with the rapid shift of the learning environment, I situated my exam process as an “isolation squared”, which was filled with complex feelings of isolation, anxiety, and being overwhelmed. In this paper, I adopted an autoethnographic approach to reflect on my comprehensive exam experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

There is not much literature focused on the feeling of isolation among doctoral students in the study process. Ali and Kohun (2016) examined isolation feeling across four stages of the doctoral program, with a specific focus on the reasons for students’ drop-out and the countermeasures. Wang and DeLaquil (2020) shared their reflective experience related to peer support, faculty mentorship, and research participation to address the issues of isolation of doctoral education in the times of COVID-19. Autoethnographic research reflects the doctoral study experience in numerous studies. Some scholars used autoethnography to reflect on their experience of a specific stage of the doctoral study process, such as taking a comprehensive exam (Kelley, 2014), completing a one-year doctoral thesis experience (Lake, 2015), and turning the dissertation into a publication (Merga, 2015). Kennedy (2020), in particular, discussed the inherent vulnerabilities of doctoral students as novice researchers in terms of uncertainty, self-doubt, and insecurity by presenting memos in her conversation with advisors and other peer

students. Some other studies focused on student-faculty mentorship. Gurvitch, Carson, and Beale (2008) explored the mentoring relationships through reflecting on their respective doctoral study experience. Trahar (2013) as an instructor and a supervisor, discussed the negotiations among students and faculty in in-class teaching and supervisory interactions. Autoethnography can also be collective work. In Miles, Creely, and Pruyn's (2019) research, Miles (the first author) shared her experience of transforming from a dropout student at a young age to a doctoral candidate over four decades later; and then Miles collaborated with two colleagues of Creely and Prunyn to present an alternative path of doctoral education through the lens of transformative learning and critical discourse analysis. Among all these studies, scholars tend to follow the chronology of pivotal events in different stages of the doctoral study process. Through critical self-reflexivity, they provided a detailed description of vignettes, conversations, email correspondence, and journal entries; and they sought to understand the meaning-making and cultural phenomena embedded in conflicts and negotiations.

Theoretical Framework

Most of the existing research on doctoral education tends to focus on the efforts of competency and knowledge construction among doctoral students. It should be noted that doctoral education is not only about generating individuals' knowledge, but it is also closely related to social participation in the academic community, moving from novice researchers to fully engaged masters. To better reflect on my doctoral comprehensive exam experience, I followed Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory, which consists of two components: Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) and Community of Practice (CoP). LPP is a process of how a learner gains competence through engaging in the activity of a sociocultural practice. *Legitimate* refers to the permission of belonging to a social organization and of controlling its resources, and *Peripheral* is used to distinguish between novices and experts. Moving toward participation in practice involves not only more access to resources and broader responsibilities within the community but also an increasing sense of identity as a master practitioner (Lave & Wenger, 1991). CoP is an evolving concept. It is initially a way of describing groups of people with common interests who work together to accomplish some activities in a community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In general, CoP can be regarded as the basic building blocks of a social learning system that facilitates learning through interactions with others (Wenger, 2010).

Methodology: Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative research approach. Ellis and Bochner (2000) defined the term autoethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 733). *Auto* represents self, *ethno* means culture, and *graphy* implies the narrative interpretation. Through a reflexive self-narrative, the author uses personal experience to generate a thick description of cultural experience that facilitates the understanding of a wider social context. The main difference between autobiography and autoethnography is that the former just illustrates a self-narrative story, while the latter incorporates cultural phenomena into the nuances of self-experience (Ellis, 2016). "Autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world; it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, and reflexively" (Ellis, 2016, p.10).

To contextualize my exam experience, I will first give a brief introduction to the doctoral program I am involved in and my learning situation. I am a doctoral student in Lifelong Learning and Adult Education at Penn State. The program generally includes three years of coursework, which ends with a comprehensive examination and is then followed by a dissertation proposal; finally, the last stage of dissertation writing and defense lasts for another two to four years. The comprehensive examination is a four-week take-home exam. Students are required to accomplish a sixty-page essay to answer three to four exam questions that are related to their research interests. Meanwhile, I am an international student from China, where the COVID-19 virus was firstly observed; and I am a mother with a son who was one year old when the exam took place. During the comprehensive exam process, I kept a journal of my exam experience, my encounters with others, and my observation of the changing social context. I finally collected twenty-one diary entries from March 27th to April 24th, 2020. I shared those entries in their original form, to first make known my feelings during the exam process; then I situated my learning experience in a wider socio-cultural context to better understand the nuanced cultural phenomena.

Overview of the Comprehensive Exam in the Context of COVID-19

I received my three exam questions on the morning of March 27, 2020, and then started the four-week exam journey. The exam dates were determined long before the coronavirus outbreak. I didn't expect the dramatic shift of learning environment of no open libraries and no on-site classes on campus in mid-March. The small desk in my bedroom is the only space I could choose to accomplish my essays; and my family can only stay at our apartment for months to keep them safe from COVID-19. Drawing from my diary entries, I presented complex feelings of isolation, anxiety, and being overwhelmed during the exam process.

Overwhelmed in the exam process. I received three exam questions. They covered a wide scope of historical development, philosophical foundations, methodologies, and research designs. I intended to accomplish each one in nine days, but the process was not as smooth as I planned. The quotes I listed below reflected my struggles in the written process.

It is 1:30 am. Another long day, today I have very little progress. I downloaded more articles to read instead of writing today. I am still debating what to write and how to express them properly. Low efficiency today. Sad:((March 31, 2020)

Today my laptop didn't work several times. Maybe I overuse it these days, and even my laptop "strikes". (April 3, 2020)

It is 1:30 am, the ninth day, I planned to finish my first question today, but sadly it lacks one session. I started with an easy question, but still didn't accomplish in 9 days, how could I finish the other difficult ones in 19 days. Time is really tight. I need to work harder. (April 4, 2020)

After lunch, I am quite tired, but my head kept running and I couldn't fell asleep. It has been a couple of days that I didn't take naps. I keep thinking of what I read and how should I organize my third question. So exhausted. (April 18, 2020)

Anxiety in COVID-19 isolation. During the exam process, I checked the positive cases of COVID-19 in our neighborhood and all over the US every day. Witnessing the rising number was very stressful. I only went out to the grocery store three times during this period but still feel anxious about the spread of the virus.

The COVID-19 number in the US is still increasing sharply. In Center County, we already have 24 contracted positive cases. To protect ourselves and others, we should stay at home. (March 30, 2020)

*Today, we witness an increase of almost 30,000 in the US (April 2, 2020)
No fruits at home. All milk and vegetables will run out soon. Today, I should go to the grocery. I haven't been outside for 10 days since my comps begin. (April 5, 2020)*

Fear of being a Chinese student. COVID-19 was first found in China. It soon spread around the globe, especially in Europe and in the US. I read news about debates on wearing masks in western countries. It was the first time I felt fear that I may get attacked because I am Chinese.

*I read the news today that experts in the US may recommend people wear masks outside. It is a really big concern for me. In China, the government stresses the importance of masks for self-protection and protecting others. But it is not recommended in the US and European countries. (March 31, 2020)
To avoid the crowd, I went out (to grocery stores) after breakfast and wear a mask. At the grocery, the fruits, meat, and vegetables are well provided. I am quite nervous that people will stare at me as I am an Asian and wear a mask, but I do see more local people also wear masks. Such a relief. It is a good signal; I am not the only one. (April 5, 2020)*

Guilty of not being an adequate mother and daughter. In my exam process, my family sacrificed the most. I did not talk to them much and mainly remained in my room for study. They had to keep staying at home, but I cannot do my duty because of the exam.

Today, I have an online class from 8 am to 11 am. I had a 5-minute break and went to the living room for drinks. My baby wanted me to hug him, I embraced him for a while and put him back to the floor again. He started to cry, but I have to return to the zoom class soon. I know because of my study and also because of the stay home order, I haven't brought him to the YMCA for swimming, to the children's library for story-time activities and to socialize with other kids. I really feel sorry for him and also my parents. They have to keep social distancing and I couldn't help them more due to my comps exam. So Sorry! (April 9, 2020)

Discussion

The journey of doctoral education could be regarded as the process of moving from novice and expert in academia. After passing the comprehensive exam, doctoral students change their titles to doctoral candidates, and then later become PhDs after graduation. The process of participation

represents a trajectory from the peripheral (novice) towards full participation (master). It demonstrates the capacity building of self-acknowledgement and self-confidence.

Another long day for reading and writing, I have written 12 of 60 pages of my comps paper, it is big progress! . . . Before I start my comps at home, I never thought I could study as efficiently as at school. So far it goes well! (March 30, 2020)

Whenever I review books or articles, I felt I return to the classroom again, the past three years' experience of the nervousness the excitement, the achievement and failure all come back to my mind. The exam is so challenging, but at the same time, it is a good opportunity for me to summarize and reflect on what I have learned in the past years. (April 17, 2020)

The participation also entails a sense of belonging in the community. During the exam process, I not only concentrated on my exam, but I also took classes and attended graduate assistant meetings virtually. As a doctoral student, I obtained peer support from friends' greetings, virtual program meetings, and zoom classes. In the mentorship relationships, I was encouraged by my committee members and my graduate assistant supervisor. Because of their support, I did not have a sense of loneliness and helplessness in the isolation status.

I ask each of my committee members about the change of format (oral exam). They all reply back to me very quickly to show their support. I am very appreciated. I know that lots of things changed because of the spread of the virus around the globe, but more things remain as they are. (April 2, 2020)

This morning, in the GA zoom meeting, my GA supervisor shared a video of fireworks to celebrate my accomplishment of the written exam. In the afternoon, I had a zoom meeting with my friends for about an hour. I feel so warm that I have their support. (April 24, 2020)

In the meantime, when situating my own learning in a wider socio-cultural context, I witnessed the increased ethnic and racial tensions in the context of COVID-19, which is another "virus" in society. My memos indicated that although people argue for a diversified and inclusive environment, the virus seems to deepen social inequality and put Asian groups into the spotlight of victims of racism.

A higher percentage is shown among African American and Latin American people. Every day, we track the updates of the coronavirus case. We all perceive that the spread of the virus is equal to everyone, no matter you are rich or poor, young or old. But unfortunately, it does reflect social inequality. (April 7, 2020)

I saw the news about an Asian girl in New York went out to throw garbage but got attacked by a guy with sulfuric acid. So awful! It reminds me of my cousin's experience recently. He studied in Chicago, and one day when he was waiting for

an elevator in the building, one person passed by coughed at him intentionally. He felt insulted. (April 8, 2020)

Conclusion

In this paper, I reflected on my comprehensive exam experience in the pivotal moment for my life and for most others in 2020. Through an autoethnographic approach, the interpretation of a special experience conveys meaning-making. In the research process, I obtained a deeper understanding of myself, my relationship with others, and the socio-cultural context. My self-reflective experience signifies the issues of belonging and its relationship to the nuanced cultural phenomena. I finally passed the comprehensive exam successfully and became a doctoral candidate. I cannot think of a better way to record the experience lived as a novice researcher in a particular historical moment. It's a unique gift for myself, and at the same time, it will also resonate in others' hearts who have gone through a difficult time together with love, faith, support, and confidence.

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